

Political Islam

A critical reader

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Charles Hirschkind

WHAT IS POLITICAL ISLAM?*

OVER THE LAST few decades, Islam has become a central point of reference for a wide range of political activities, arguments and opposition movements. The term “political Islam” has been adopted by many scholars in order to identify this seemingly unprecedented irruption of Islamic religion into the secular domain of politics and thus to distinguish these practices from the forms of personal piety, belief, and ritual conventionally subsumed in Western scholarship under the unmarked category “Islam”. In the brief comments that follow, I suggest why we might need to rethink this basic framework.

The claim that contemporary Muslim activists are putting Islam to use for political purposes seems, at least in some instances, to be warranted. Political parties such as Hizb al-’Amal in Egypt or the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria that base their appeal on their Islamic credentials appear to exemplify this instrumental relation to religion. Yet a problem remains, even in such seemingly obvious examples: in what way does the distinction between the political and nonpolitical domains of social life hold today? Many scholars have argued that “political Islam” involves an illegitimate extension of the Islamic tradition outside of the properly religious domain it has historically occupied. Few, however, have explored this trend in relation to the contemporaneous expansion of state power and concern into vast domains of social life previously outside its purview – including that of religion.

As we know, through this ongoing process central to modern nation building, such institutions as education, worship, social welfare and family have been incorporated to varying degrees within the regulatory apparatuses of the modernizing state. Whether in entering into business contracts, selling wares on the street, disciplining children, adding a room to a house, in all births, marriages, deaths – at each juncture the state is present as overseer or guarantor, defining limits, procedures and necessary preconditions.

As a consequence, modern politics and the forms of power it deploys have become a condition for the practice of many personal activities. As for religion, to the extent that the institutions enabling the cultivation of religious virtue become subsumed within (and transformed by) legal and administrative structures linked to the state, the (traditional) project of preserving those virtues will necessarily be “political” if it is to succeed. Within both public and private schools in Egypt, for example, the curriculum is mandated by the state: those wishing to promote or maintain Islamic pedagogical practices necessarily have to engage political power.

This does not mean that all forms of contemporary Islamic activism involve trying to “capture the state.” The vast majority of these movements involve preaching and other *da’wa* (missionary) activities, alms-giving, providing medical care, mosque building, publishing and generally promoting what is considered in the society to be public virtue through community action. Nonetheless, these activities engage the domain we call the political both in the sense that they are subject to restrictions imposed by the state (licensing, etc.), and in so much as they must often compete with state or state-supported institutions (pedagogic, confessional, medical) promoting Western models of family, worship, leisure, social responsibility, etc. The success of even a conservative project to preserve a traditional form of personal piety will depend on its ability to engage with the legal, bureaucratic, disciplinary and technological resources of modern power that shape contemporary societies.

This argument diverges from the common one that Islam fuses religion and politics, *din wa dawla*, in a way incompatible with Western analytical categories. It is worth noting, however, that this frequently heard claim does not deny the fact that Muslim thinkers draw distinctions between *din* and *dawla*; only that the specific domains designated by these terms, and the structure of their interrelations do not mirror the situation in Europe in regard to European states and the Church. Moreover, this leaves aside the fact that the division between religious and political domains even in Western societies has always been far more porous than was previously assumed, as much recent work has made clear.¹ Indeed, as Tocqueville long ago observed, Protestant Christianity plays an extremely important role in US politics in setting the moral boundaries and concerns within which political discussion unfolds, and hence can be considered the premiere political institution in some sense. I do not refer here to the lobbying efforts of church groups and other religious advocacy associations, but rather to the way a pervasive Christianity has been to varying degrees a constitutive element of Western political institutions. What is clear, in any case, is that greater recognition must be given to the way Western concepts (religion, political, secular, temporal) reflect specific historical developments, and cannot be applied as a set of universal categories or natural domains.

Lastly, although discussions of political motivation or class interest should continue to be important parts of accounts of contemporary Islam, they are not necessarily germane to a description of every problem the analyst poses. Statements like the following have too long been *de rigueur* in accounts of the Islamic *sahwa* (awakening): “Marginalized male elites experience socioeconomic disparities as cultural loss, and they are drawn to participate in fundamentalist cadres in order to militate against nationalist structures that they deplore as un-Islamic because they are, above all, ineffective.”² Such analyses reduce the movements to an expression of the socioeconomic conditions which gave rise to them. The “marginalized male elites” speak nothing new to us,

as their arguments and projects, once properly translated into the language of political economy, seem entirely familiar. Lost, in other words, is any sense of the specificity of the claims and reasoning of the actors. This is brushed aside as we reiterate what we already know about the universal operation of socioeconomic disparities.

Grasping such complexity will require a much more subtle approach than one grounded in a simple distinction between (modern) political goals and (traditional) religious ones. Terms such as “political Islam” are inadequate here as they frame our inquiries around a posited distortion or corruption of properly religious practice. In this way, the disruptive intrusions or outright destruction enacted upon society by the modernizing state never even figure in the analysis. In contrast, the various attempts of religious people to respond to that disruption are rendered suspect, with almost no attempt to distinguish those instances where such a critical stance is warranted from those where it is not. It is not surprising, in this light, that militant violence and public intolerance have become the central issues of so many studies of *al-sahwa al-islamiyya* (Islamic awakening), while the extensive coercion and torture practiced by governments get relegated to a footnote.

Notes

- * I wish to thank Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, Hussein Agrama, Steve Niva and Lisa Hajjar for their comments and suggestions on this brief article. Its shortcomings are my responsibility alone.

- 1 See William Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
- 2 Bruce Lawrence, *The Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), p. 226.